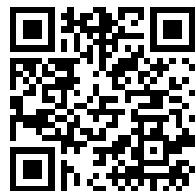

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DESERT VICTORY

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Fourth Indian Division's Epic Story

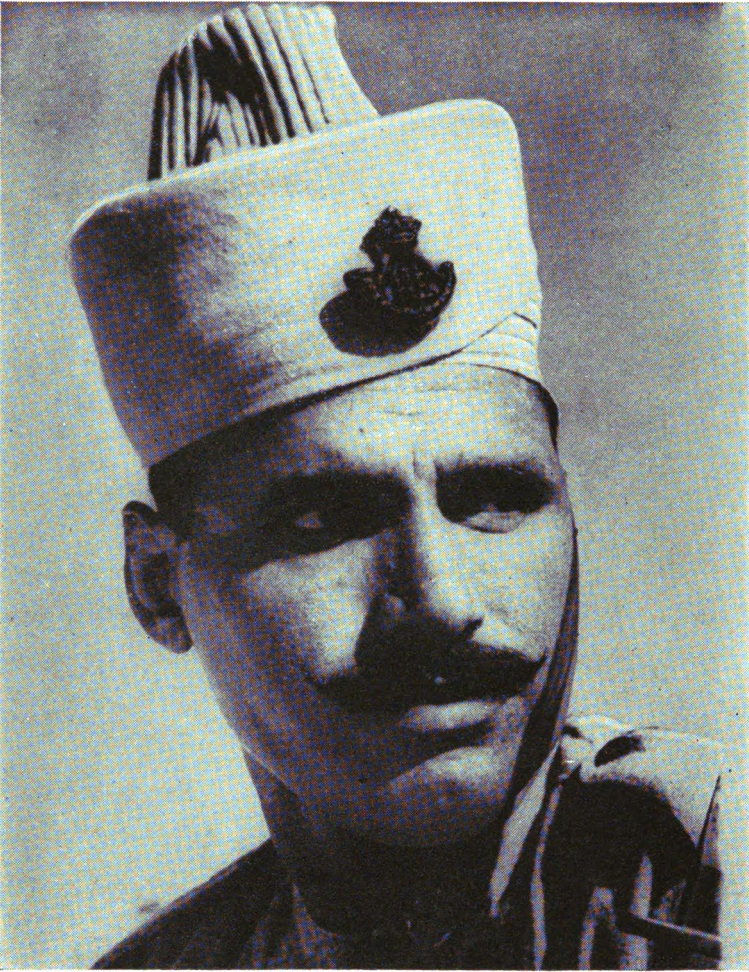
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FRONT COVER PAGE SHOWS PUNJABI MUSLIM SOLDIER.

COVER PAGE 2 (ABOVE) RAJPUT WARRIOR.

BACK COVER PAGE SIKH VETERAN.

FIRST PAGE OF TEXT (OPPOSITE), PICTURE SHOWS INDIANS STORMING A HILL UNDER ARTILLERY FIRE (NOTE SHELLBURST AT LEFT ABOUT TEN YARDS AHEAD OF LINE OF ADVANCING TROOPS).

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*A*FTER three and a half years of conflict in the African war areas, there emerges a triumphant record of achievement by the Fourth Indian Division—"The Fighting Fourth."

Never before in the history of the Indian Army has one of her infantry divisions maintained such continuous action over so long and difficult a period. The story of the 4th Division's part in the African campaigns is one of relentless tenacity and refusal to accept defeat in fight against tremendous odds. It is a story in which an Empire is destroyed and a Continent freed. Not once in the magnificent drive across the vast spaces of North Africa did the Indian troops falter. They showed the world that India's fighting soldiers are men of iron, and that what had been achieved in all the African campaigns could and would be achieved against the Japanese hordes in the fight for freedom in the East.

Mostly they were Indians, these men, simple cultivators from the villages and wheat-fields of the Punjab, stately, bearded Sikhs—magnificent figures of men—proud Rajput riflemen, worthy inheritors of a great martial tradition, hawk-eyed Pathans and fierce Baluchis from the bleak, sun-blistered hills of the North-West Frontier, sturdy Gurkhas from Nepal, warlike Maharattas and hardy Garhwalis. . . . Infantry, Mechanized Cavalry, Ordnance, Supplies, Engineers, Medical Services—all were Indian. Only three battalions and the gunners were Britons.

When, in August 1939, the 4th Indian Division disembarked in Egypt, not one of its officers or men had ever handled an anti-tank rifle or mortar. Still on a mule-transport basis, the internal combustion engine was unfamiliar to most of them.

100,000 Prisoners

Yet by the winter of 1942, in the thrust and counter-thrust of desert fighting, on this most mobile and mechanized of all the war fronts, these men of the mules and mountains had shattered two great armies, and

helped to arrest and set in train the destruction of a third—the redoubtable Afrika Korps. They had suffered 100 per cent casualties but taken 100,000 prisoners (that is seven times their own strength) and destroyed well over 100 aeroplanes and tanks.

They had, in the words of Field-Marshal Wavell, “fought in the dusty wastes of the Western Desert, in the bush of the Abyssinian border, on the dry, scorching plains of the Sudan, in the towering rocky mountains of Eritrea and Abyssinia, and amid the softer and greener hills of Syria.”

When Italy stabbed at stricken France’s back, General Wavell’s small force holding Egypt suddenly found itself caught between Graziani’s mighty host of 300,000, preparing in Libya to strike down an easy prey, and another great army of 250,000 in Italian East Africa. Yet within two short months, in a series of sharp hammer blows, the 4th Indian Division had broken Graziani’s army which had been preparing for months for a triumphant advance into Egypt. In one hour and twenty-five minutes, in the midst of a thick sandstorm that raged





without ceasing for three days, these men, by a brilliant combination of shock tactics and surprise, had taken 4,000 prisoners and the huge perimeter camp of Nibeiwa, the key which unlocked the gates of Sidi Barrani, where the Division added to its bag an Italian Corps Commander and all his staff.

The End of Mussolini's Abyssinian Empire

In this moment of triumph, leaving General Wavell's army to sweep on to Sollum, Bardia, Tobruk and Benghazi, and reap to the full the fruits of their great victory, the men of the Fourth Division experienced a bitter disappointment. They were withdrawn from the fray. There was other work for them to do. They had destroyed one

great army on the West. Now they turned and shattered another, 2,000 miles to the East.

Operating in some of the most difficult country in the world, in almost unbearable heat, against positions considered impregnable, it took them just two and a half months. In Abyssinia they battled on the peaks and among the clouds for the mountain fortress of Keren. On the map of this grim and desolate place, which has been likened to "a great medieval castle whose portcullis has fallen down and drawbridge has been pulled up in the face of the triumphant enemy," famous Indian and British regiments inscribed their names in letters of blood.

'Rajputana Ridge,' 'Sikh Spur,' 'Cameron Ridge,' bear testimony to feats of endurance, handfuls of men clinging desperately to the steep craggy sides of these



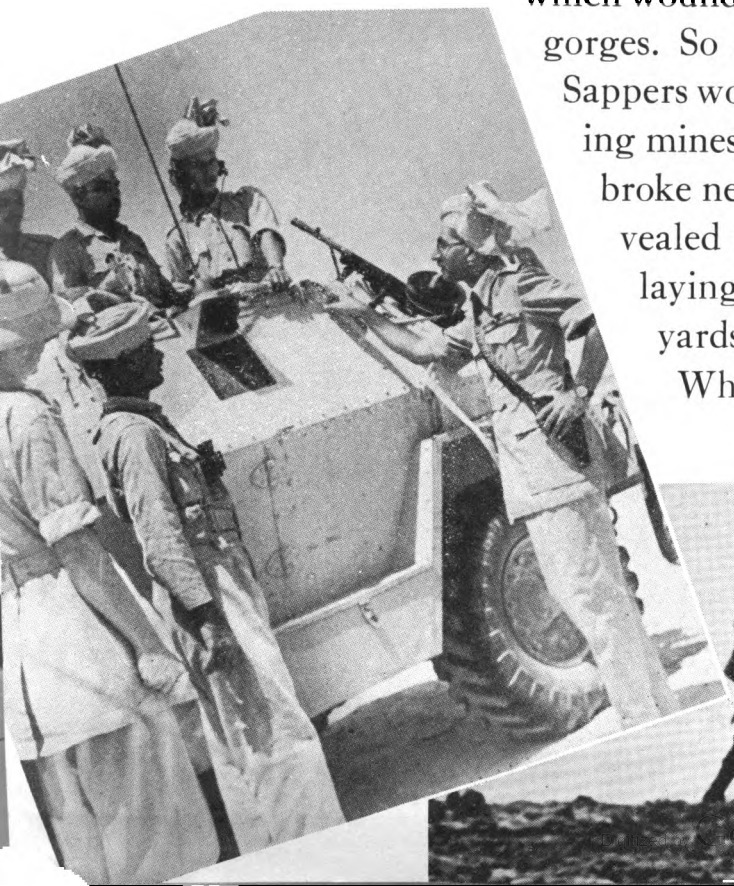
towering razor-edges of pure rock, blasted all the time by enemy artillery from still unconquered peaks, showered with grenades from above, fired down upon by an enemy invisible behind huge boulders, ensconced behind forests of barbed wire.

This time the Division would have given a great deal to have back the mules it had left behind in India. From each battalion, one company had to be detached for the dangerous, back-breaking, unspectacular work of hauling water, ammunition and food up the mountain-sides to their comrades fighting among the clouds.

A Dawn Surprise

Superhuman efforts were called for from the Sappers, clearing mines and debris from the mountain roads which wound through narrow gorges. So speedily did the Sappers work one night lifting mines that when dawn broke next morning it revealed the Italians busy laying them only 300 yards ahead!

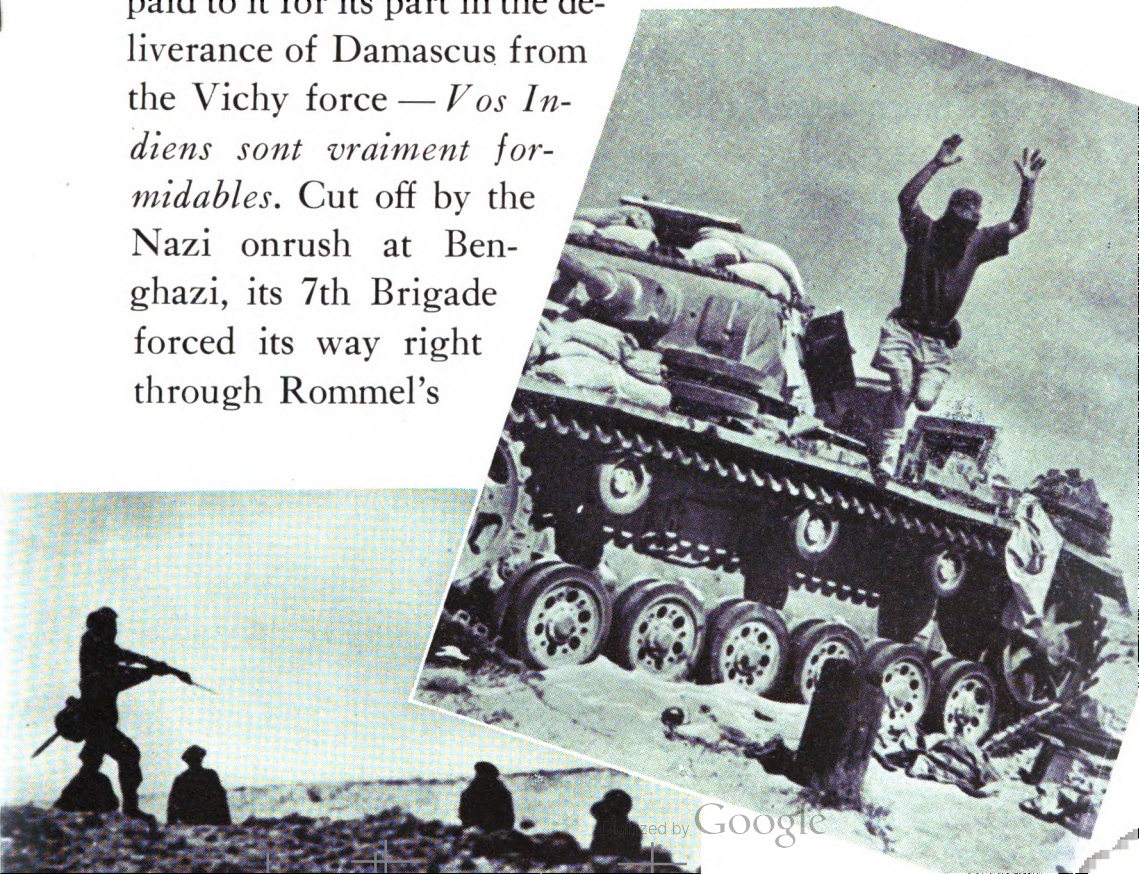
When, at last, after



weeks of clinging grimly to the steep sides of shell-racked ridges, the last pinnacle had fallen, the bodies of Indian riflemen, their bayonets in their hands, were discovered under the topmost boulders. And in the last resort, it was just such desperate bayonet charges against overwhelming odds by mere handfuls of men which finally broke open this “impregnable” natural fortress—a fact recognised in the posthumous award of the Victoria Cross to Subedar Richpal Ram of the Rajputana Rifles—leader of one such valiant little band.

Breaking Through a Trap

Back again in the Desert, the Division proved itself as steadfast in retreat as it had been aggressive in attack, earning time and again the tribute a French Officer had paid to it for its part in the deliverance of Damascus from the Vichy force — *Vos Indiens sont vraiment formidables*. Cut off by the Nazi onrush at Benghazi, its 7th Brigade forced its way right through Rommel’s





ring to fight a brilliant rearguard action, inflicting considerable casualties, leaving behind only wrecked harbours and smoking ruins.

The Division's 11th Brigade had the task of holding half the perimeter of Tobruk against Rommel's onrush. To the last round, it stuck limpet-like to its line, adding one more inspiring chapter to the 4th Division's record.

El Alamein

El Alamein to Tunis is the last chapter of the Divi-





sion's campaign in Africa; its reputation as the spearhead of the Eighth Army was already won after arduous service on many Mideast fronts. It had opened the campaign against the Germans and the Italians shortly after war started and it was to finish it off when there came its dramatic transfer from the Eighth to the First Army in the last few days of the campaign.

The Great Chase

At El Alamein a small number of veteran Indian troops held on grimly to Ruweisat Ridge. The enemy was halted and some breathing space needed to re-equip and train reinforcements. Then in November 1942, the reinforced Eighth Army under the command of General Montgomery, broke through the German lines, led by British armoured formations. The Fourth Division's role was to create a diversion but one of its brigades distinguished itself in the subsidiary thrust opening another path for our armour just north of Ruweisat Ridge.

So the tide turned. The great chase back through the



length of Libya, Cyrenaica and Tripolitania followed. The capture of Tobruk on November 13th, the occupation of Benghazi seven days later, and then Rommel was driven from El Agheila. By January 23, 1943, we had occupied Tripoli and Hal; we had advanced 1,400 miles in three months.

The Fourth Division took little part in this great move, however, but came into the picture again when the Eighth Army smashed its way through the Mareth defences on the border of Tunis. Gabes Oudref and Sedjenane were captured March 29th, Sfax and Sousse by April 12th and Enfidaville, April 20th, and in all these actions the Fourth Indian Division took a leading part.

It was in April that Subedar Lal Bahadur Thapa, performed a feat of valor which won him the Victoria Cross

—Britain's highest award for valor—the fifth won by the Indian Army in this war.

The Subedar, in command of eighteen men, was ordered to secure a gully in a range of hills, on the capture of which depended the further advance of the whole Division, since it provided a bridgehead over the enemy's anti-tank ditch. The Subedar and his men fought their way through the narrow gully, flanked by steep cliffs, and exposed to intense and sustained point-blank machine gun fire. When they reached the crest, only the Subedar and two of his men remained alive, but the route was open, the tanks went through, and the way was made ready for the Division.

The official citation said that the Subedar's "ruthless determination to reach his objective had a decisive effect on the success of the whole operation."

Secret Night March

Then came the order to transfer to the First Army in one of the most dramatic forced night marches ever carried out by the Allied force and it ended in the final thrust against Tunis. During the pitch blackness of the cloudy moonless night, while the British gunners put

down a curtain of artillery fire, the Division joined the British Seventh Armoured Division, pulled out of the Eighth Army line north of Enfidaville and pushed northwest as fast as they could go.

It was a triumph in leadership and timing. Divisional guns, armoured cars and other vehicles moved in the great battle convoy nose to tail along the winding mountain roads to reach their new battle area—at Medjex. A single hour after the Divisional Headquarters' arrival they moved forward again — to attack the Germans' 334th Division.

And a cunning attack too. At dawn, May 5th, while British troops roared "Good old Fourth," lithe Indians in battle dress, after their eleven mile tramp through the night, began their assault on the German strong point.

Sneaking noiselessly up the hillsides they burst in on the astonished garrison, their deadly Kukris taking terrible toll. The Germans opened fire with mortars, known to the Indians as "sobbing sisters," but the men of the Fourth Division went on mercilessly until the Germans surrendered after the bitterest hand to hand fighting on the hill crests.

And to crown all, the German Commander-in-Chief von Arnim surrendered to the Fourth Division.

It was the end of the African campaign. "The Fourth" entered Tunis and their work was done — for the time being.

That the Germans themselves realise that in Indian fighting men they have a formidable foe is shown by a

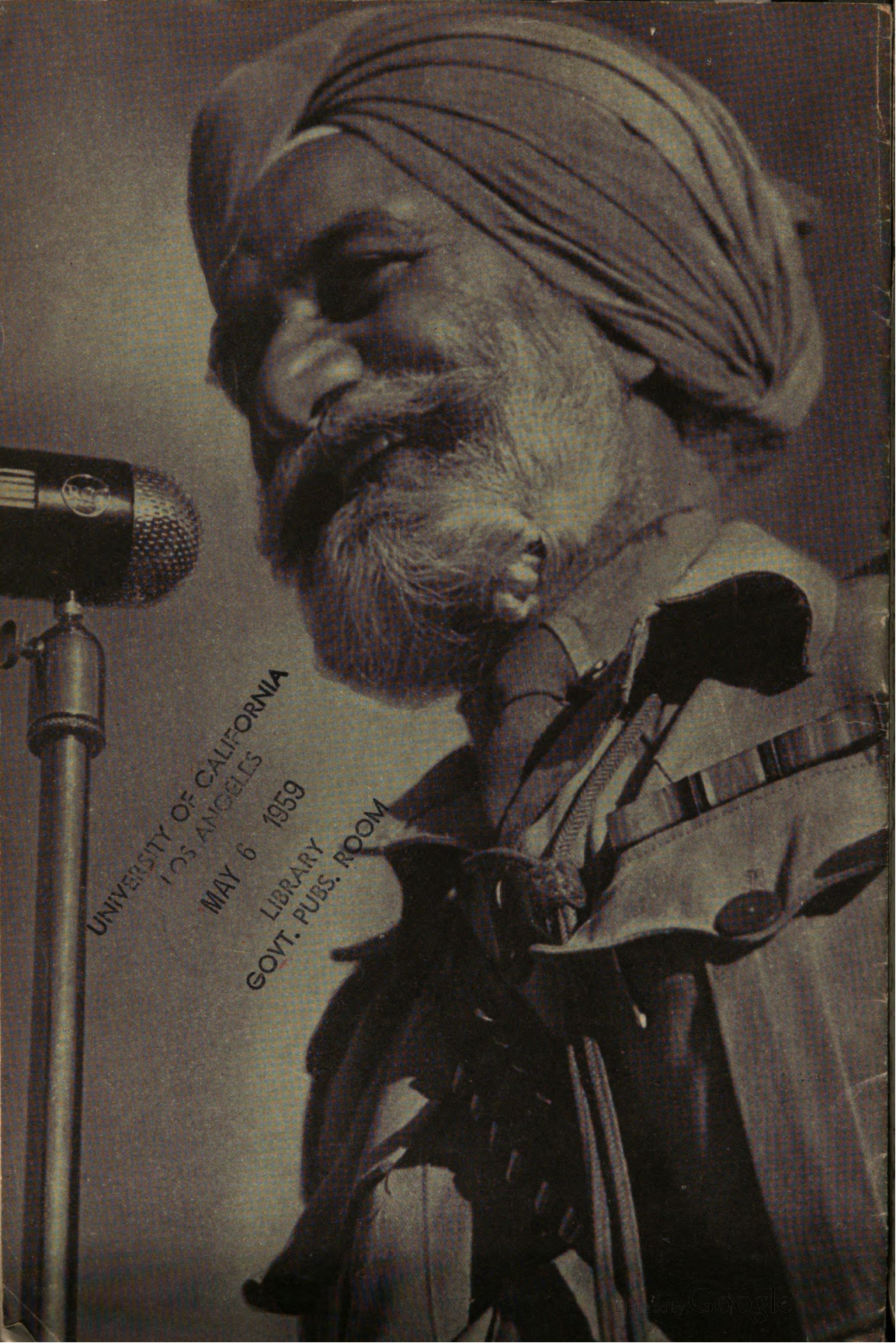


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note by a German Intelligence Officer, found when the Nazis retreated from Benghazi. "So long as the Seventh British Armoured Division and the Fourth Indian Division are in the desert," it ran, "we must watch out. They will spearhead any attack."

Now let these men's British comrades speak. "... If anyone ever suggests to you that Indian troops are not all that might be desired," wrote a young officer of a British battalion, "just you clip him one at once. They are damned good fighters. . . . Although our fellows cannot speak their language, they get on together in first-class style. The Indians are so friendly and pleasant, and yet such MEN."





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